

Forty Traditions

The **Forty Traditions** (*al-arba'īn hadīth*) is a popular genre of *hadīth* collections found throughout the Muslim world from at least the third/ninth century until the present. These works generally consist of forty *hadīths*, often with some commentary, and frequently refer to a variant of the Prophetic *hadīth*, “Whoever memorises/preserves forty *hadīths* of my *sunna* (or, my traditions) for my community, God will raise him among the jurists on Resurrection Day.” They can be divided broadly into authored collections, often on a specific theme, and posthumous collections extracted by a dedicated student from his teacher’s personal collection of narrations.

1. THE “FORTY *HADĪTHS*” TRADITION

The final *hadīth* of the earliest extant Forty Tradition collection, by Muhammad b. Aslam al-Tūsī (d. 242/856–7), is a variation of the “Whoever memorises/preserves forty *hadīths*” tradition, with at least two notoriously weak transmitters in its *isnād* (chain of authorities). The early Forty Traditions collections of al-Hasan b. Sufyān al-Nasawī (d. 303/915–6) and Abū Bakr al-Ājurī (d. 360/971) also contain variations of this *hadīth*, and it is found narrated on the authority of the sixth Shī'ī Imām Ja'far al-Ṣādiq (d. 148/765) in the *Kitāb al-īlm* of Abū Ja'far al-Kulaynī's (d. 329/941) canonical Imāmī Shī'ī collection of *akhbār* (reports) titled *Uṣūl al-kāfi*. By the mid-fifth/eleventh century, Ibn 'Abd al-Barr (d. 463/1071) could include in his *Jāmi' bayān al-īlm wa-faḍlīh* seven versions of this *hadīth* circulating in al-Andalus, and, by the end of the following century in Baghdad, Ibn al-Jawzī (d. 597/1201)

assembled, in his *al-Ilal al-mutanāhiya fī l-aḥādīth al-wāhiya*, twenty-four narrations of this tradition, traced through thirteen different Companions. This *hadīth* is not found in any of the canonical Sunnī *hadīth* collections or in the noncanonical compilations of the early period, perhaps because Sunnī *hadīth* critics from at least the time of Ibn 'Adī (d. 365/975–6) and al-Dāraqutnī (d. 385/995) have declared all versions of it weak, if not forged (the most comprehensive critical analysis of this *hadīth* is that by Ibn al-Jawzī, in *al-Ilal al-mutanāhiya*, 1:119–29). While critical Sunnī scholars universally considered this *hadīth* weak, Imāmī Shī'ī scholars have held it authentic, according to the great twentieth-century scholar, Aghā Buzurg al-Tihrānī, in *al-Dhārī'a fī taṣānīf al-Shī'a* (1:409), who cites Muḥammad Bāqir al-Majlīsī's (d. 1111/1699) discussion of this tradition in *Kitāb al-īlm*, *bāb* 20 of *Bihār al-anwār* (al-Majlīsī includes ten narrations of this tradition in this chapter).

2. OVERVIEW OF FORTY TRADITIONS WORKS

Little research has been undertaken into the Forty Traditions genre of *hadīth* compilation. The contemporary Azharī-trained scholar Sahl al-Ūd composed a useful guide titled *al-Mu'īn 'alā ma'rīsat kutub al-arba'īn*, in which he mentions the titles of 529 Forty Traditions books, and Aghā Buzurg al-Tihrānī identifies, in *al-Dhārī'a*, approximately one hundred titles, many of which are in Persian. More than fifty years ago, Abdulkadir Karahan published an important study, *İslâm-Türk edebiyatında Kirk Hadis*, about the literary tradition of rendering Arabic Forty Traditions collections into Persian and Ottoman Turkish verse. The most useful work to date in a Western language is Louis Pouzet's *Une*

herméneutique de la tradition islamique, which also includes a valuable critical edition and French translation of al-Nawawī's short commentary on his famous Forty Traditions book.

Sunnī scholars generally ascribe the inaugural Forty Traditions book to the master ascetic scholar 'Abdallāh b. al-Mubārak (d. 181/797), although it is never cited. The "second" book, by Muḥammad b. Aslam al-Tūsī, has been published, as have several other early collections. On the basis of a preliminary reading of multiple Forty Traditions books, it is possible to discern four broad categories of these works: basic Islamic teachings, thematic works, boasting works, and collections of exceptionally profound Prophetic statements.

3. BASIC ISLAMIC TEACHINGS

The early Sunnī collections of al-Tūsī, al-Nasawī, and al-Ājurrī and Bahā' al-Dīn al-Āmilī's (d. 1030/1621) popular Shī'ī collection contain *hadīths* about ablutions, prayer, almsgiving, and other basic Islamic teachings. They combine traditions reporting the prophet Muḥammad's actions along with his didactic statements, in contrast to later collections, which relate Prophetic statements almost exclusively, many of which are aphorisms. While al-Tūsī's Forty Traditions collection consists almost exclusively of legal and ethical *hadīths*, al-Ājurrī's book begins with thirteen theological *hadīths*—including the hallmark Sunnī Gabriel tradition about *islām*, *īmān*, and *ihsān* (submission, faith, and beautiful conduct), the "Ten Companions promised Paradise" *hadīth*, and the report that "My community will divide into seventy-three sects"—before shifting to legal topics and concluding with a few general traditions, such as "Religion is sincerity."

4. THEMATIC WORKS

Most of the Forty Traditions books published so far are thematic. Abū Sa'īd al-Mālīmī (d. 412/1021–2), Abū 'Abd al-Rahmān al-Sulamī (d. 412/1021–2), and Abū Nu'aym al-Īṣfahānī (d. 430/1038) all composed Forty Traditions books identifying the primary teachings—and, in the case of al-Mālīmī, teachers—of Shūfism. 'Abdallāh Anṣārī al-Harawī (d. 481/1089) and Shams al-Dīn al-Dhahabī (d. 748/1348) composed Forty Tradition works dedicated to promoting *hadīth*-based, *kalām*-free, theology. Muhyī l-Dīn Ibn 'Arabī (d. 637/1240) and Mullā 'Alī al-Qārī (1014/1606) each published Forty Traditions books consisting exclusively of divine *hadīths* (*hadīth qudsī*, traditions that are believed to contain God's statements conveyed by the Angel Gabriel to Muḥammad but not part of the Qur'ān). Abū l-Futūḥ al-Tārī (d. 555/1160) composed his Forty Traditions book *Kitāb al-arba'īn fī irshād al-sā'irīn ilā manāzil al-muttaqīn* in such a way that each *hadīth* passes through a distinct Companion, for whom he provides biographical information. The Ottoman-era Damascene Ismā'īl b. Muḥammad al-'Ajlūnī (d. 1162/1749) brought together the initial *hadīths* of forty classical *hadīth* collections in his *Iqd al-jawhar al-thamīn*. The Zaydī Forty Traditions collection, *al-Arba'īn al-Saylaqīya*, by Abū l-Qāsim Zayd b. 'Abdallāh al-Saylaqī (d. before 390/1000?), is devoted overwhelmingly to the themes of asceticism and renunciation of worldly pleasures. The Meccan scholar Ibn Ḥajar al-Ḥaytamī (d. 974/1567) composed, as a gift for the Ottoman sultan Süleyman (Sulaymān) the Magnificent (r. 926–74/1520–66), a Forty Traditions book on the theme of justice. Other Forty Traditions books are dedicated to warfare, generosity, and marriage, among other themes.

5. BOASTING WORKS

The boasting genre is most apparent in books in which the compiler declares that he is improving upon an earlier Forty Traditions collection or emphasises the excellence of the elevated (meaning very short) *isnāds* of his narrations. Two of Abū l-Qāsim Ibn ‘Asākir’s (d. 571/1176) Forty Traditions books are good examples of this genre. In his ostentatiously titled *Kitāb al-arba‘īn al-buldāniyya ‘an arba‘īn min arba‘īn li-arba‘īn fī arba‘īn* (“The book of forty [traditions] from forty [teachers] from forty [towns] passing through forty [Companions] on forty [topics]”), he states that he is improving upon Abū Tāhir al-Silāfi’s (d. 575/1180) forty-*hadīth* collection, in which al-Silāfi narrated a single *hadīth* from forty of his teachers from forty different towns, adding to these stipulations the requirements that each *hadīth* be narrated through a distinct Companion and be on a distinct topic. Ibn ‘Asākir’s *al-Arba‘īn hadīthīn min al-musāwāt* showcases his ability to collect traditions with elevated *isnāds*, which demonstrates his greater proximity to the Prophet than that of his contemporaries, whose *isnāds* presumably are longer, rendering them more remote from Muḥammad. Also of the boasting genre of Forty Traditions is Șadr al-Dīn al-Bakrī’s (d. 656/1258) *Kitāb al-arba‘īn*. After lamenting, in his introduction, that every possible permutation of Forty Traditions book seems to have been written, he realises he could reach a new summit by compiling a book in which each *hadīth* is narrated with full *isnād* from a distinct collection of Forty Traditions, on the authority of a distinct Companion, about a distinct topic. This book provides valuable insight into the early growth of the genre of Forty Traditions books, especially in Khurāsān among Shāfi‘ī scholars.

6. COLLECTIONS OF EXCEPTIONALLY PROFOUND PROPHETIC STATEMENTS

This type of collection may have become increasing prevalent after the publication of the most significant Sunnī Forty Traditions book, the *Arba‘īn* of Muḥyī l-Dīn Yaḥyā b. Sharaf al-Nawawī (d. 676/1277). In his brief introduction, al-Nawawī informs the reader that his collection will differ from earlier collections because it will include only sound *hadīths*, without *isnāds*, that touch upon the core teachings of Islam. His collection actually consists of forty-three traditions (numbered in most editions as forty-two, with two independent *hadīths* cited under the heading of *hadīth* 27). This short work has been translated into many languages, including English, and commentaries have been written on it by many major Muslim scholars, such as Ibn Rajab (d. 795/1392), who added eight *hadīths* to round the number to fifty, Ibn al-Mulaqqin (d. 804/1401–2), Ibn Ḥajar al-Ḥaytamī, and Muḥammad Rāshīd Riḍā (d. 1935). Thirty of the *hadīths* in al-Nawawī’s collection are found in one or both of the *Sahīhs* of al-Bukhārī and Muslim, and all but a handful of the remaining thirteen are found in other canonical collections. Unlike later works of this genre like the published Forty Traditions collections of Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī (d. 911/1505) and Shāh Walī Allāh al-Dihlawī (d. 1176/1762), al-Nawawī includes both longer *hadīths* and divine *hadīths*.

While the Forty Traditions books by al-Nawawī and al-Āmilī long ago eclipsed their peer Sunnī and Shī‘ī collections, the genre shows no signs of exhaustion and, given the large size of most *hadīth* collections, should remain popular for years to come.

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Fūdī, ‘Abdallāh b. Muḥammad

‘Abdallāh b. Muḥammad Fūdī (1766–1828) was the younger brother of Shaykh ‘Uthmān b. Muḥammad Fūdī (d. 1817), who established the extensive reformed Islamic state known now as the Sokoto Caliphate. He was primarily a scholar and a *mujāhid* in the *jihād* that established this state. With the *jihād* won in 1808, the conquered territories, now to be governed as Islamically as possible, were divided into four quadrants, of which the western and southern were allotted to ‘Abdallāh, with his nephew Muḥammad al-Bukhārī (d. 1839 or 1842) in charge of the south, under ‘Abdallāh. ‘Abdallāh’s headquarters were initially at Bodinga, and then, after 1817, at Gwandu; around him settled many poets and Sūfīs who preferred to the huge city of Sokoto, with its traders, soldiers, and fortune-seekers, the exceedingly scholarly atmosphere that ‘Abdallāh encouraged.

‘Abdallāh was born on 2 Jumādā II 1180/5 November 1766 and died on 6 Muḥarram 1245/8 July 1829. Traditionally described as “tall, fat, and black,” he was a brave, able commander in the *jihād* and was wounded twice. He wrote all his life—his first dated poem was written in 1774 (when he was eight years old) and his last work in 1828—and he is said to have practised writing every night. He

wrote two biographical works in Arabic, *Īdā‘ al-nusukh* (“The repository of texts”) and *Tazīn al-waraqāt* (“Ornament of pages”), in which he records his teachers and collects his own poetry written before and during the *jihād*, but his major books, all in Arabic, in both prose and verse, were on *tafsīr* (Qur’ānic commentary) (e.g., *Diyā‘ al-ta‘wīl*, “The long light,” 2 vols., 1815–6) and Arabic grammar and morphology; several of his eighty-eight known works are on *uṣūl al-fiqh* (principles of jurisprudence) and Islamic government (e.g., *Diyā‘ al-hukkām*, “light of the rulers,” written for the *jihād* leaders in Kano in 1806), as well as on *ḥadīth* and Sūfīsm—for instance the Qādīriyya, a widespread Sūfī order, of which ‘Abd al-Qādir Jīlānī (d. 561/1166), a Ḥanbalī scholar active in Baghdad, became, after his death, the namesake and patron.

‘Abdallāh was less willing than his brother, Shaykh ‘Uthmān, to compromise on matters of governance and law—he permitted only Mālikī rulings—to the extent that he not only disagreed openly with him (e.g., on ‘Uthmān’s use of *takfīr*, the Muslim declaration of another’s Muslim apostasy) but also became so disillusioned with the indiscipline of the *mujāhidūn* that he abandoned the *jihād* in 1806 to leave for Mecca. However, he stopped en route at Kano (in present-day northern Nigeria), in order to perform for his hosts the nightly *tafsīr* in Ramaḍān and to write for them a book on government (*Diyā‘ al-hukkām*); in response, they persuaded him to return west and rejoin the *jihād*.

Although formally the *amīr* at Gwandu, he left much of the later campaigning to his nephew and co-administrator, Muḥammad al-Bukhārī, preferring to write and teach. Some 750 students and companions (*ashāb*) of his are known. As a